# Characteristics and Dynamics of Election News Coverage in Germany

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# 18

# Characteristics and Dynamics of Election News Coverage in Germany

Frank Esser and Katharina Hemmer

The form and content of election news coverage in Western democracies is influenced by four structural macro-level factors: the strength of political parties, the government regulation of the media sector, the ownership structure of media companies, and the political and journalistic culture. With regard to the first impact factor, Germany's political structure is characterized by a stable multi-party system, covering a broad range of the political spectrum. Compared to the United States, party organizations are still strong and play a powerful role in the formation of governments, policy making, and the administration of campaigns. During election periods, they control which candidates are eventually selected and usually have the final word on political programs and the messages that should be conveyed to the public. Since German campaigns are fairly party-centered, election news is by implication more likely to be issue-focused and oriented to ideological goals.

With regard to the second factor, the regulatory framework of the German media sector is stricter than, for example, that of the United States, despite a considerable drive toward deregulation in the preceding decades. It applies stricter ownership rules to the print and broadcasting sectors in order to secure diversity and competition. In addition, press laws and broadcasting acts contain more detailed public interest obligations in their texts than can be found, for example, in the United States. On the German press market, which can be said to be relatively healthy in terms of economic revenue and political diversity, newspapers are required to follow principles of political balance. This is, however, notwithstanding that the prestigious opinion-leading national papers tend to follow distinct politically motivated editorial lines.

The third impact factor refers to the German broadcast sector which is divided into public service and private channels. Germany is the largest country in the European Union, and its television market is the most varied but also the most competitive. Surrounded by commercial rivals, the public service channels remain surprisingly popular. Public broadcasting is expected to provide more and better-quality public affairs coverage and to offer higher standards of informational, educational, and recreational programs. The means to achieve these goals are provided through license-fee funding, also designed to protect public channels from competitive market forces and direct government influences—at least in theory. In reality, the funding system forces public channels to remain widely popular, or at least respected, because otherwise the obligatory license-fee would lose its legitimate basis, in essence serving the general public and not just a niche market. Election coverage on public channels is subject to stricter regulatory rules than on

private channels which have more leeway with regard to political advertising and journalistic content on their airwaves.

Journalistic culture, the fourth and last factor, is less adversarial than in the United States. German people in general and news people in particular seem a little less skeptical towards politicians and political institutions. This fits in with a political culture in which voting is considered a civic duty and where turnout levels consistently approach 80%.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The tradition of democratic government in Germany can be seen as relatively short, but a tradition in which the media have played a prominent role. The first parliamentary system, introduced in 1919, rapidly deteriorated due to deficiencies in its first constitution and the success of Adolf Hitler. Exploiting the possibilities of a constitutional and political system that offered (too) many liberties, Hitler legally came to power in 1933. Soon after, a totalitarian order was established in which the media were used as a means to perpetuate the regime's grip on power; the freedom of the press was abolished, and all media underwent a process of political alignment. It was not until the postwar years that democracy was reinstituted, and it was with the experience of the preceding decades in mind that the new constitution, the "Grundgesetz" or Basic Law, was conceived. It is in the context of a country with a tradition of federalism and partisanship combined with the failure of the Weimar Republic and the events of the Third Reich that the contemporary situation of media and elections has to be understood. The chapter therefore continues with a detailed overview of the development and functional aspects of current structures in politics and the media that shape the election coverage in Germany. It then describes the developments that have taken place with regard to the content and effects of election coverage in recent years, and tries to illustrate the interrelations and implications that continue to influence German election coverage today.

## THE GERMAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

In Germany, parties have a long tradition as important political organizations. While the first organizations resembling parties were founded in 1848, today's party system is based on the democratic, competitive party system the allies created after World War II. In the constitution, parties are described as a "necessary part of the free democratic constitutional structure," fulfilling a public duty in contributing to the political decision-making process of the people (German party law, §1).

After 1945, a number of parties without ties to the former Nazi government were licensed in democratic Western Germany.[1] Among them were the *Social Democratic Party* (SPD), which was close in philosophy to the SPD of the Weimar Republic, and the *Christian Democratic Union* (CDU), a newly founded party appealing to a less narrow ideological group. Parties in Germany are not, as in some other countries, oriented towards certain issues, but rather occupy a specific political stance, still more or less in tradition with their origin: the Christian Democrats (CDU) lean towards conservative, middle-class values, the Social Democrats (SPD) are oriented towards labor party values of the working and lower middle-class. Of the smaller parties in parliament, the FDP (*Free Democratic Party*) promotes civic liberties and free market values, the PDS (*Party of Democratic Socialism*) caters to a leftist, socialist audience, and the *Green* party focuses mostly on environmental and peace issues. However, the two biggest parties, SPD and CDU, today



constitute catch-all parties (so-called *Volksparteien* or people's parties). They do not pursue any special interest politics for any certain class or group of people but are oriented towards common welfare and political compromise. Although party alignment has abated in the last few years (Gluchowski & Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, 1998; Jung & Roth, 1998), the long tradition of party membership and loyalty usually makes party identification a still relevant influence in elections.

### Elections in Germany

Due to the importance of parties in its political landscape, Germany is often labeled a "party-driven democracy." It is organized as a parliamentary federal republic with proportional representation; the two institutions elected directly by the people are the federal parliament and the local state parliaments. Local state parliaments and municipal councils are elected by the voters every four to five years according to the local state constitution. Federal elections take place every four years and the chancellor, the head of the government, is in turn elected every four years by the federal parliament.

In federal elections, every citizen over 18 has two votes: the first vote is a direct vote for a candidate in the local constituency, who is elected by a majority of votes (even if he or she is not affiliated with any party); the second vote is given to a party. The parties are allocated seats in parliament by proportional representation. However, a party needs to receive at least 5% of the second votes (or three direct mandates from directly won constituencies through first votes) to form a "group" in parliament. This 5% barrier has been implemented following the experiences of the Weimar Republic, where the numerous small groups represented in its parliament led to constant disagreements and in turn to unstable governments, often incapable of any action due to lack of a majority in parliament. Despite this regulation, parties that receive at 0.5% of all votes are still eligible for government funding.

Parties usually have to form coalitions, since an absolute majority in parliament is needed to constitute a government. In the expectation of leading such a coalition, parties often nominate their candidate for the chancellorship in advance of the election campaign. This practice adds a personal aspect to an otherwise rather party-dominated election process.

## THE GERMAN MEDIA SYSTEM

Newspapers as collections of news first emerged in Germany roughly around 1500. In the 19th century, a party press as well as an opinion and interest related press developed, and in 1916 Alfred Hugenberg founded the first newspaper conglomerate. In the Weimar Republic, however, freedom of the press was not guaranteed and with Hitler's seizure of power, the press was politically aligned. Newspapers were defined as "agencies of public duties" and used for propaganda purposes. It was not until 1945 that the American, British, and French allies "blacked out" all existing media in West Germany and founded new newspapers and publishing houses. Starting from 1949, anyone who was not affiliated with the Nazi regime could obtain a license to start a newspaper business.[2] When the new constitution was agreed upon the same year, it was with this history in mind that the freedom of the press was written into the constitution: "Everyone has the right to freely express and spread his opinion in word, writing and pictures and to unobstructedly inform himself through publicly available sources. The freedom of the press and the freedom of coverage through broadcasting and movies are guaranteed. No censorship is taking place" (Art. 5, Par. 1, German Basic Law).[3]

Today, Germany's press landscape is rather diverse: In 2006, there were 353 daily newspapers,

28 weekly papers, and six Sunday papers. Their combined circulation reached 27 million copies.[4] The press is regulated by acts of parliament of the 16 states, which do not specify any rules regarding election coverage. However, the press, like other media, is seen as a decisive factor in the formation of public opinion and therefore obliged to pay special attention to accuracy concerning content and sources of its coverage. A right of reply is guaranteed in all press laws in case of false reports; the press law of North-Rhine-Westphalia, for example, states that "the editor-in-chief and the publisher of a periodical are obligated to print a counterstatement of persons or institutions which are affected by an allegation made in the periodical" (Art. 11, Par. 1, Press Law of the State of North-Rhine-Westphalia).[5]

There is also a press code established by the German Press Council, which is jointly operated by several large publishing groups and journalist unions. Everyone can file complaints with the Press Council regarding media coverage. However, its sanctions are rather innocuous: the council can express its disapproval or, in harsh cases, give a reprimand to the publication in question, which is then obliged to publish the offence. The one publication with a reputation for not paying much attention to Press Council reprimands is Germany's one genuine tabloid: the *Bild.* Known for its lurid coverage and often rather conservative-leaning editorial drift, *Bild* is the best-selling newspaper in Europe, although its circulation dropped from 5 million in 1997 to 3.5 million in 2007. It is owned by the Axel Springer publishing house, which with a 23% market share[6] is the largest publishing group in Germany.

Together, the five largest publishing groups control more than 40% of the circulation of daily newspapers, of which most, like the *Bild*, have an implicit political leaning. Several opinion-leading papers can be identified across the political spectrum: The *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ) and the weekly *Spiegel* magazine are the most prominent and most influential representatives of the left range on the political scale. In this camp, we also find the smaller dailies *Frankfurter Rundschau* (FR) and *tageszeitung* (taz), as well as the news weeklies *Zeit* and *Stern*. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) and the *Welt* occupy more conservative positions, as does the weekly *Focus* magazine. For these nationally distributed papers, significant journalistic and social influence can be assumed (Wilke, 1999; Kleinsteuber, 2004). While the political leaning of the press is rooted in the country's tradition and history of party press and interest-driven publications, open editorial endorsements of political candidates are rare.

### Broadcasting in Germany

Germany has a dual system of public and private broadcasting. Public broadcasting has existed since 1945, on a basis the allies helped establish. Public broadcast channels are designated to inform and educate citizens and to "function as a medium and element of the process of free individual and public formation of opinion" (Art. 11, State Treaty on Broadcasting in Germany, 2004). They are financed mainly through license fees and to a very limited degree through advertising revenue, and are self-regulated by independent public broadcasting boards. Their mixed revenue sources allow them independence from the state as well as the market. Commercial broadcasting was introduced in the 1980s, and today more than 50 different channels exist. In fact, the crowded German television market is the most competitive in Europe. Public television channels are still among the top five most watched channels in Germany as of 2006.[7] They are regulated by the State Media Treaty, which dictates that public broadcasting stations have to "respect and protect human dignity. They should contribute to strengthen respect for life, freedom, and physical inviolability, the respect for beliefs and opinions of others, [as well as] ethical and religious beliefs" (Art. 3, State Media Treaty 2004). Furthermore, public broadcasting is committed to "principles of objectivity and impartiality of coverage" as well as diversity of opinion, and coverage has to be "independent and factual" (Art 3, State Media Treaty, 2004).



On public channels, political newscasts cannot be sponsored, and commentary has to be separated from news coverage and labeled accordingly (Art. 10, State Media Treaty, 2004). If polls are used, their representativeness must be specified. Total advertising time is restricted to 20 minutes per day, and prohibited on Sundays, holidays, and after 8 pm on work days. Public channels are not constitutionally obliged to give airtime to political parties, but are often committed to do so by state broadcasting laws. They traditionally provide an appropriate amount of airtime to each party in any case as part of their public obligation of impartial information. Additionally, since public broadcasters are expected to cover the whole election with professional distance and impartiality, the boards have implemented certain rules regarding the time of the election campaign: no appearances of politicians in entertainment shows, and no active news work by journalists who are in any way affiliated with a party's campaign (Drück, 2004).

Private channels are partly regulated by the State Media Treaty as well, however they have no duty to inform or educate nor do they have the same strict obligations concerning advertising. While airtime is provided free of charge by public channels, parties have to pay (a reduced priced of 50% of the usually spot rate) on private channels (Holtz-Bacha, 2005, 2006).

### Journalism Culture

Next to the political and media system, the role perceptions and normative orientations of journalists and the relationship between journalists and politicians is another important systemic factor to be considered. It is important to recognize that media in Germany do not merely constitute private enterprises, but rather fulfill a function as public institutions. Journalist unions and professional organizations register high membership, and the relationship between the media, the political system and the public can be seen as a strong system of organized social groups. Of special importance is the powerful role of political parties in many parts of society. Party politics also have an influence on media organizations because their executive boards are often either controlled by party representatives (in the case of the public broadcasting channels) or because media organizations pursue politically motivated editorial lines (in the case of national newspapers). As a result, Pfetsch (2001) argues that the political communication style in Germany has evolved around a press-party parallelism. In that setting, there is more consensual symbiosis between the news media and politicians. As a consequence, German news journalists lag behind their U.S. counterparts as far as their watchdog-mentality is concerned.

In line with this context, the German media landscape is characterized by external rather than internal pluralism, the editorial lines are often politically motivated, and the self-concept of journalists relies not only on conveying neutral information, but also on analysis and interpretation of complex issues (Weischenberg et al., 2006). This role perception can be traced back to the tradition of journalists as political commentators during periods when the press acted as party organs. With a history as political commentators as well as news workers, German journalists do not refer as strongly to professional norms of neutrality as their American colleagues do (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004).[8] Political communication is generally characterized by a more politically motivated style because journalists' news practices of and political positions of parties are more closely linked than, for example, in the United States (Pfetsch, 2001).

## THE NEWS COVERAGE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: DEVELOPMENTS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The main concerns associated with recent changes in Germany's news culture (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006; Schulz & Zeh, 2005) are related to the democratic quality of the election coverage (whether

or not it discourages political participation and perceived legitimacy of the system) and to Americanization tendencies (which are associated with decreasing amounts of election coverage, decreasing length of candidate sound bites, more personalized news, more interpretive news, more strategic news, and more negative news). The use of American campaign practices by German parties was first noticed in 1953, when the Christian Democrats began using opinion research and advertising agencies. 1961 is considered the year of the first entirely professionally organized election campaign, with the youthful candidate of the SPD, Willy Brandt, as a perfect fit for a personalized campaign with John F. Kennedy as a role model. Brandt even challenged his competitor Adenauer to a televised debate; Adenauer, however, declined, and TV debates between the two front runners were not introduced until 2002. Today, the diffusion of U.S. practices and structures is still a recurring topic in election campaign and media research; especially processes of personalization, the use of sound bites and game frames, and an increasing negativity are prominent issues in numerous studies. A driving force behind the research on these issues is concern over a decline of democratic values among the citizenry—political apathy and disinterest as well as dwindling political participation is dreaded. Voter turnout, which has traditionally been high in Germany, has fallen from constantly over 85% throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to 79% in 2002 and 78% in 2005.

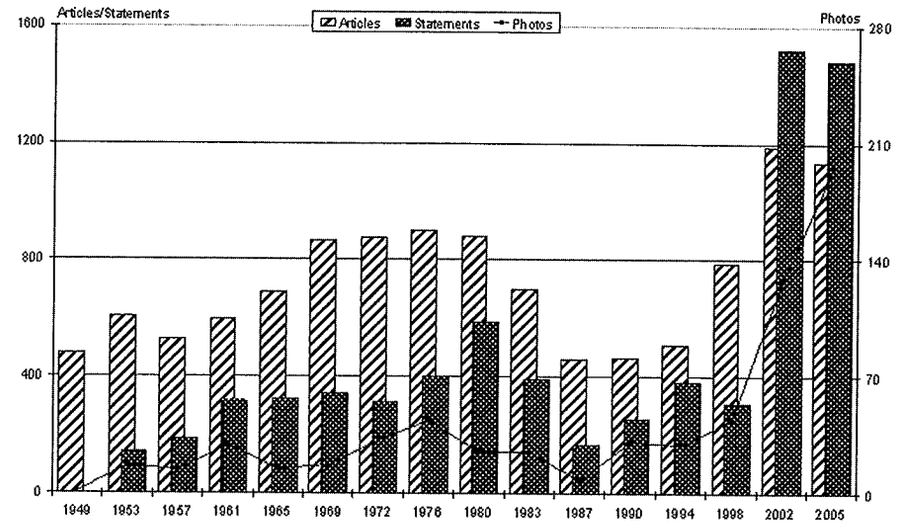
## Intensity of Election Coverage

Between the first democratic election in 1949 and 2005, 16 general elections have been held, four of them under "irregular" circumstances due to the retirement of a chancellor, a government coalition change, a motion of constructive non-confidence, and a failed vote of confidence. Over this period, election coverage rose in a continuous wave-like process from a mere 6% of overall political coverage in 1949 to almost triple this amount in the 1970s, and has since been more or less stable at this higher level (Schulz & Zeh, 2006, 2007; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001). Explanatory factors for these fluctuations over time include changes in the editorial space available for political news, competing and compelling news events (like German reunification in 1990), the closeness of individual races as well as the intensity of campaigning efforts (which has been increasing lately), and the introduction of media centered campaign events (like the TV debates in 2002). Figure 18.1 depicts the development in the German press.

## Personalization of Election Coverage

Indicating a more personalized news style, the share of election stories with visual images and speeches from the main candidates has mounted steadily on the main evening news broadcasts. This increased degree of personalization, as documented in Figure 18.2, can be largely attributed to the introduction of televised debates. In 2002, the first on-stage duel between the two main candidates (Gerhard Schröder of SPD and Edmund Stoiber of CDU) was aired. The event received a vast amount of candidate-centered media coverage and more than 15 million people watched the debate. In 2005, the debate became the ultimate media event, broadcast simultaneously by Germany's four biggest television channels (the public ARD and ZDF as well as the commercial RTL and SAT1). The setup of the event was very similar to that of the U.S. debates, as were the analyses by experts and journalists that followed. The debates were publicly greeted as a chance to provide voters with a more direct source of information about the candidates, and the argument has been made that they were a major influence on the portrayal of the candidates for chancellor in the press (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007b; Weiss, 2005).[9] Although Genz et al. (2001) note that the amount of personalization was rather stable during the 1990s, the attention



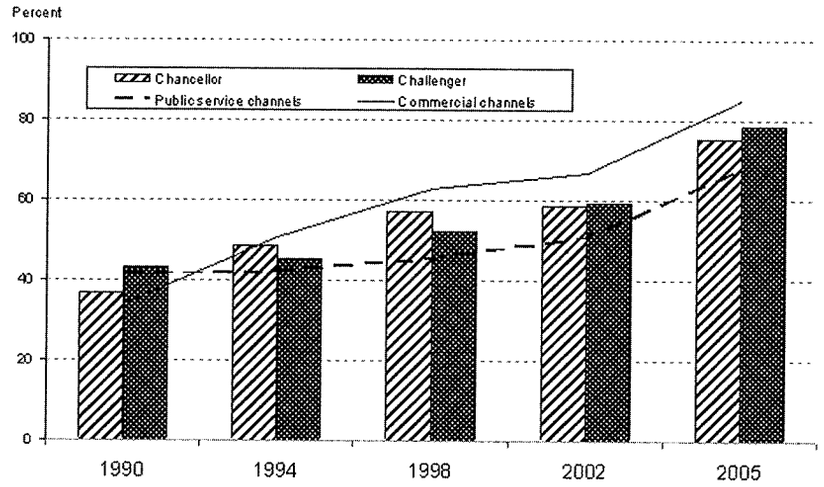



*Basis:* 11670 election-related articles, 7130 evaluative statements and 650 photographs in the national newspapers *Frankfurter Rundschau, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* and *Die Welt* in the last four weeks before polling day (of which a 50% sample was coded).
*Source:* Reinemann & Wilke (2007a)..

FIGURE 18.1 Amount of election coverage in the German press.

paid towards the candidates has been clearly on the rise recently (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006)—at least in part the result of debate-related follow-up coverage.

Despite the important role of the parties, single candidates attract the attention of the voters more and more. The televised advertisements published by the parties during the 2002 and 2005 campaigns affirm this impression: All spots by the Green party and the FDP revolved around their candidates, and at least half of the spots of SPD and CDU/CSU did the same. However,




*Note:* Chart depicts the proportion of election stories with visual images (and original voice) of main candidates on the evening newscasts of the major public service channels (ARD Tagesschau and ZDF heute) and the major commercial channels (RTL Aktuell and SAT1 News) in the last four weeks before polling day.
*Source:* Schulz & Zeh (2007).

FIGURE 18.2 Personalization of election coverage on German television.

counterarguments against this macrotrend of personalization exist: First, regarding the televised ads, candidate appearance is often restricted to visual presence. As Holtz-Bacha (2003, p. 21) argues, "personalization in terms of an active role of the candidate is less frequent." Second, while personalization of campaign coverage has generally been higher after 1976 than before, the level of concentration on single candidates is still dependent on personality and political situation. Wilke and Reinemann (2001, p. 301) note "vast differences...among the individual elections" regarding personalized coverage, agreeing with Holtz-Bacha (2003) who states that "every election has its own face and is ...dependent on the respective...context." This observation receives even more weight when considering a third counterargument: The amount of stories with a personal focus has been rising mainly because campaign coverage in general has been rising. Yet, these counterarguments cannot refute the general trend toward increased personalization of the campaign coverage. In sum, German television news conveys an increasingly lively, colorful, and exciting picture of the election campaign in which the chancellor candidates play an increasingly prominent role.

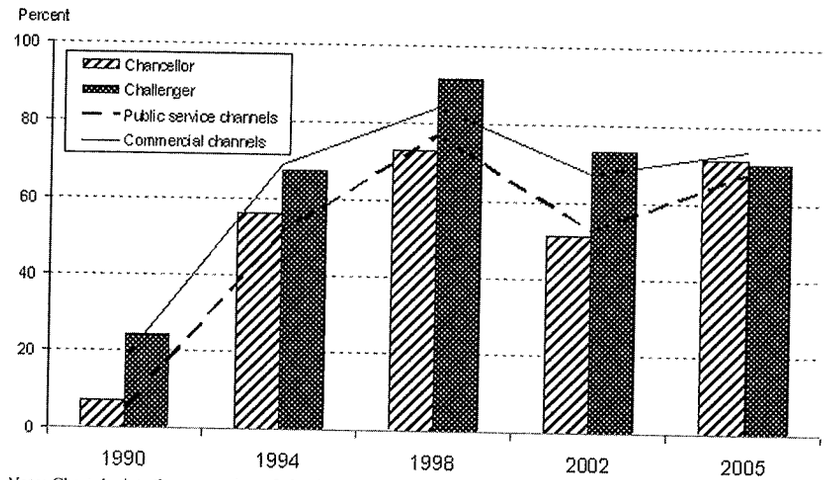
## Incumbency Bonus

Despite the professional selection of news, there used to be a stable incumbency advantage in Germany. The "chancellor bonus" means that the incumbent generally receives more media coverage than his opponents, independently of the individual persons concerned (Semetko & Schoenbach, 1994). But this bonus is usually limited to attention, not evaluation —more coverage does not automatically mean better coverage (Holtz-Bacha, 2003). On the contrary: incumbents are generally criticized more frequently than their opponents (Genz et al., 2001; Krüger et al., 2005). Also, whenever the respective challengers appear in media reports they play a relatively important role (Schulz & Zeh, 2006)—it seems that the threshold for media attention is higher when it comes to the less well known challengers as opposed to the established and familiar figure of the chancellor. Recent studies have suggested that the chancellor bonus is on the decline (Krüger et al., 2005), partly as a result of the introduction of the televised debates in which the challenger per se is as important as the incumbent (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007b). With hindsight, the chancellor bonus was probably a historical phenomenon of the 1990s. In the 2005 campaign reporting the incumbent and the challenger were similarly portrayed.

## Issue vs. Strategy Frames

Another topic that has caught the attention of election research concerning the level of direct confrontation between the two main candidates in the media is framing. Would German coverage follow the U.S. example and use game or strategy frames in the majority of election stories? With a reduction of persons of interest to two main characters and a focus on individual candidates rather than party organizations, election events could easily be boiled down to suspenseful duels: Who would prevail? And indeed, several studies have found that game frames (often used synonymously with strategy or horse-race frames) have become increasingly salient in German election coverage over the years (Klingemann & Kaase, 2001; Pfetsch, 1986; Schulz & Zeh, 2006; Wilke & Reinemann, 2001; Schulz, 1998). Genz et al. (2001) report a rising amount of horse race coverage, with "82% of the articles which concerned the election as central issue of their coverage focusing on the election as a contest" (Genz et al., 2001, p. 404). The most recent study by Schulz and Zeh (2007) found that strategy framing has been dominating television's portrayal of the candidates on German television news for the last decade. As Figure 18.3 illustrates, the only exception to this pattern was the 1990 election that closely followed German reunification.






*Note:* Chart depicts the proportion of election stories that mention the two main candidates and are framed in strategic scenarios – aired on the evening newscasts of the major public service channels (ARD *Tagesschau* and *ZDF heute*) and the major commercial channels (RTL *Aktuell* and SAT1 *News*) in the last four weeks before polling day.
*Source:* Schulz & Zeh (2007).

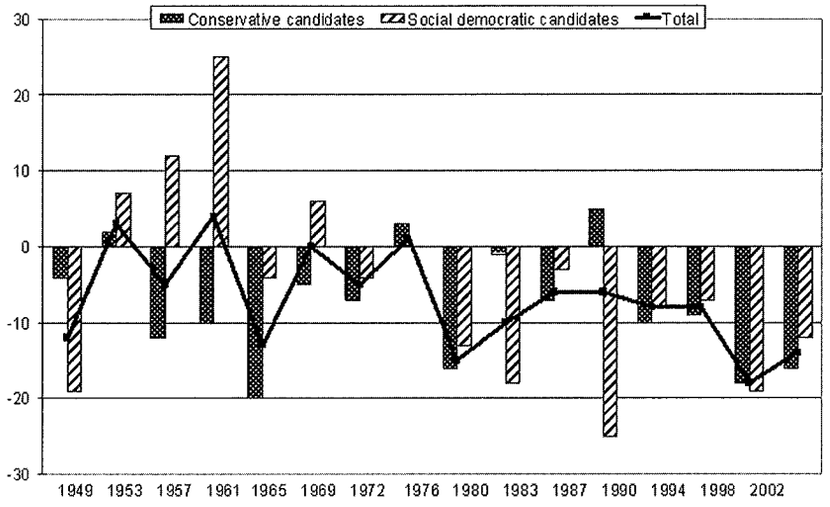
FIGURE 18.3 Strategic framing of election coverage on German television.

The strategy prevalence was most clearly displayed during the 1998 election where it reached its present peak and, due to a ceiling effect, slightly fell from there. Schulz and Zeh's (2007) data in Figure 18.3 also show that commercial channels and public service channels do not substantially differ in their framing patterns.

Holtz-Bacha (2003) and Weiss (2005) both found that horse-race coverage increased especially after the broadcasting of the TV debates, which indicates an impact of the debate format on the perception and depiction of the two main candidates and the content-character of the election campaign itself. Especially candidates` publicity efforts and news management techniques are framed in strategic scenarios by the news media (Esser & D'Angelo, 2006). There has traditionally been much concern about a dominance of the game frame and the consequences for democracy in the spirit of Patterson (1993, p. 93), who suspected the press of "strengthening the voters' mistrust of the candidates and reducing their sense of involvement...because the game schema drives its analysis." Still, some German scholars view the trend towards a dominance of strategy frames in less negative terms. They attest to a dynamic impetus which the game frame can lend to election coverage (Brosius, 1995), and acknowledge that the "game schema" allows for more dramatic and vivid presentation (Schulz & Zeh, 2006, 2007).

## Negativism

There has been a clear trend towards negativism in election coverage in the German press – both in quality papers (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007b) and the largest tabloid *Bild* (Semetko & Schönbach, 2003). The predominance of negative articles about the main candidates is especially pronounced since 1980, as can be seen from Figure 18.4. Only the 1990 election right after Germany's reunification brought positive evaluations for Chancellor Helmut Kohl. In all newspapers, notwithstanding their editorial polices or political preferences, there is a clear predominance of negative articles about both the incumbents and challengers. Thus, political leanings only rarely determined the evaluation of a specific candidate.




*Basis:* Chart depicts the balance of the proportion of positive and negative newspaper articles that mention the two main candidates and where published in the national newspapers *Frankfurter Rundschau, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* and *Die Welt* during the last four weeks before polling day.
*Source:* Reinemann & Wilke (2007a).

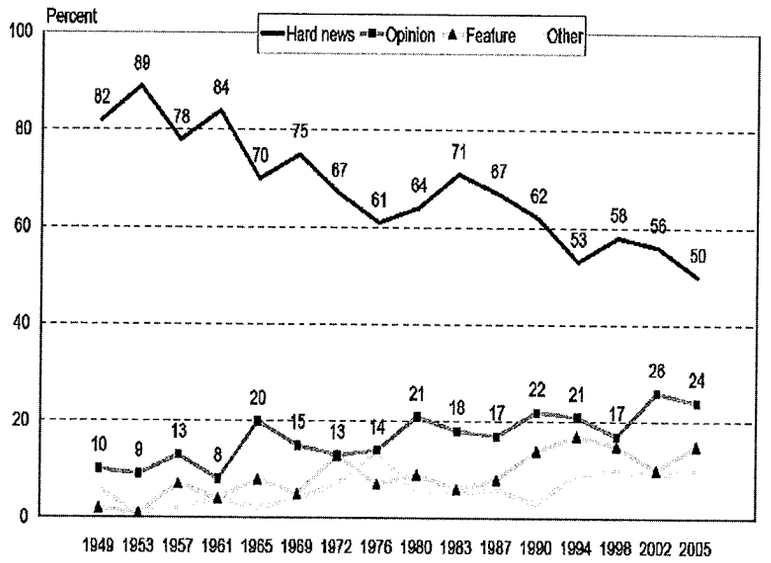
FIGURE 18.4 Tone of candidate portrayals in the German press.

There is broad agreement that negative coverage has risen (Holtz-Bacha, 1999, 2000), if only parallel to the general increase in election-related media coverage (Schulz & Zeh, 2006). Genz et al. (2001), however, observe that while negativity is proliferating, it is not so much the journalists who voice criticism, but rather other politicians, experts, or citizens quoted in the media. This analysis is supported by Donsbach and Jandura (2003), who investigated the link between parties' press releases and media coverage and found that many media outlets did not adapt the rather destructive and negative rhetoric of most press releases: While the majority of press releases attacked the opponent, media reports often had a neutralizing tendency. This tendency is most pronounced on television, where Schulz and Zeh (2007) registered a surplus of references with a positive tendency for both candidates. They found that the tendency towards negative journalistic evaluations has abated, and that in 2005 the television presence of both main candidates was generally more favorable than unfavorable.[10] In sum, we see more negativity in the press than on television. This seems the result of strong principles of professionalism which demand a balanced and objective selection of broadcast news during election campaign time and restrict the integration of evaluative commentary into the news coverage. But across the board, we see more reporting of negative quotes or attacks by candidates, their parties or other campaign sources. Where we see an incline in negative evaluations by journalists themselves this may be related to adverse reactions by the press towards attempts of media manipulation by candidates.

## Interpretive Coverage and Political Bias

Semetko and Schönbach's (2003) study of *Bild*'s coverage of the election showed that the tabloid included "more analytical pieces or commentaries alongside [its] tabloid style of routine political reporting" (p. 64). While *Bild* certainly does not set the standard for German journalism, there is some evidence for a tendency towards more interpretive coverage in the quality press also. Reinemann and Wilke's (2007b) analysis of broadsheet newspapers shows that since the 1950s, objective news coverage has been decreasing while the share of more subjective journalistic formats (features, opinion) has increased. Figure 18.5 reveals that the 2005 campaign saw the smallest proportion of hard news formats ever: Every fourth article was an opinion piece, every sixth a feature, and the rest were composed of other formats (portraits, interviews, and so on).






*Basis:* Chart depicts the share of subjective and objective story formats of election news articles published in the national newspapers *Frankfurter Rundschau, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* and *Die Welt* during the last four weeks before polling day.
*Source:* Reinemann & Wilke (2007b).

FIGURE 18.5 "Objective" and "interpretative" story formats in the German press.

The tabloid *Bild* is an exception insofar as it publishes more explicit value judgments concerning politics than does any other German paper (Semetko & Schönbach, 1994, 2003). Still, many German media outlets do show clear and distinct tendencies towards certain political parties or candidates (Kindelman, 1994; Schulz 1991). They tend to synchronize news reporting with the editorial line of their political commentary and also prefer to publish poll results and expert assessments that are congruent with the editorial line (Donsbach 1997; Hagen, 1993). This partisan reporting is stronger in the daily than in the weekly press, and stronger in press media than in broadcast media. Donsbach and Weisbach (2005, p. 125) put forward the notion of a "double public opinion climate"—while opinion research in 2002 saw CDU/CSU as the frontrunner, the media suggested a rather tight race between CDU/CSU and SPD via editorial comments and subjective reporting. This practice of partisan coverage in German election reporting, however, has to be seen in the light of "the coexistence of political parallelism and professionalization that is one of the distinctive features of the Democratic Corporatist model" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) to which one can assign the German media system. Working in a media system which has its roots in party press as well as commercialized media organizations,

> the [German] journalist is a professional who respects rules and routines agreed upon by the profession as a whole and who insists on the autonomy of journalistic practice from political interference. At the same time he or she maintains a political/ideological identity, both as an individual and as part of a news organization and in many cases aspires actively to intervene in the political world. (Hallin & Mancini 2004, pp. 177–178)

In a comparative study by Patterson and Donsbach (1996), journalists were surveyed about their partisanship and news decisions, and it showed that both were significantly related in the U.S., the U.K., Italy, Sweden, and Germany. However, "the German news system is the most partisan [and] partisanship can and does intrude on news decisions, even among journalists who are conscientiously committed to a code of strict neutrality" (pp. 465–466). Another explanation for the difference between the importance of partisanship in Germany on the one hand and the U.S. and U.K. on the other could be that due to the external pluralism inherent in the German media system, the need for internal pluralism and political balance is not as strong as it might be otherwise (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 181–182).

### Opinion Polls

Another example of this possible internal one-sidedness or self-referentiality is pointed out by Rössler (2003), who found that television news tend to rely on their own poll data for publication. Indeed, there are almost no restrictions as to the publication of opinion polls in Germany. But whenever an opinion poll is published, information about the representativeness of the data has to be included. While there is "no distinction between the precampaign period, the campaign, and a reflection period before voting day" (Drück 2004, p. 72) legally, the publication of exit polls before the closure of all polling stations is prohibited to prevent undue influence on voters (Art. 32, Par. 5, *Federal Election Law*). Also, only 6% of all political news during election time 2002 included statements about the status of politicians or parties in public opinion, and only every second of these statements reported opinion poll data. This amount has been stable since 1998 (Donsbach & Weisbach, 2005) and shows that opinion polls are only one source among several, and not one of the most important, either: Previous studies found that opinion polls only cause a very slight bandwagon-effect for the undecided and politically less interested. Only in few cases can they influence strategic voting in favor of a voter's second preference due to the electoral quota system (Rössler, 2003).

## COVERAGE OF ELECTION CAMPAIGNS: USE AND EFFECTS

As mentioned before, voter turnout in Germany is relatively high compared to other Western democracies: Close to 80% of voters went to the polls in 2005, which is partly explained by the fact that voting is not only defined as a basic right, but also perceived as a civic duty (Esser & De Vreese, 2007). Observers of recent elections however have expressed concern about an increasingly volatile electorate: Between 23% and 68% of votes for each party in the 2002 and 2005 general elections were swing votes, and only the two biggest parties, CDU/CSU and SPD, received the majority of votes from their base (Infratest Dimap Wahlreport, 2005). The most significant cause for this development is the decline of party identification (Jung & Roth, 1998) and the dwindling importance of most socioeconomic status variables for voting decisions: "Traditional social cleavages or group identification, and social class in particular, once established as the determinants of the voting decision…have become less relevant" (Schönbach, 1996, p. 91). Instead, sources of communication have become more influential (Schulz et al., 2005); and although this includes mass media as well as interpersonal communication, television plays the most significant role as source of campaign information for the majority of voters (Schulz et al., 2005). While 56% of Germans over 18 used television as their main source of campaign information in the 2005 election, only 6% preferred the Internet, 8% radio, and 24% newspapers (Geese et al., 2005). Reliance on TV increases with age, and especially people with little interest in politics rank television highest as information source, which is attributed to the fact that the politically less interested care more for entertainment than information (Noelle-Neumann & Haumann, 2005). They turn to television as a main provider of entertainment also during election campaigns, and this behavior has fuelled the debate about the use and benefit of action- and entertainment-centered campaign coverage in the media (Klingemann & Kaase, 2001; Pfetsch, 1986; Schulz, 1998). Some recent studies argue that entertainment-centered television coverage has the advantage of reaching even the uninterested, whose importance in elections is growing as they tend to change their voting intention more often than do the more interested (Noelle-Neumann & Haumann, 1999). As Noelle-Neumann and Haumann (1999 2005, p. 21) put it: "if the politically remote citizens become providers of political majorities, all political impulses and information that reach their apolitical world acquire special relevance."



One televised event that has certainly reached this significance of late have been the TV debates. With 21 million viewers (Geese et al., 2005), that is every third person in the electorate, it seems that the debates have unified a public sphere that has been increasingly fragmented since the introduction of the dual media system in the 1980s. It might seem that it has become noticeably harder for candidates and parties to reach a large audience, although data on the 2005 election paints a rather positive picture: Close to 80% of the populace over 18 watched at least one of the special programs broadcast before the election (Geese et al., 2005). More than half of the electorate watched only public broadcasting programming during the 2005 election, and contrary to data about sinking public trust in the media (Kaase, 2000), the coverage in 2005 was well received: Especially the coverage of the two public broadcasting channels was evaluated very positively by the audience, independently of age, party ID, or residence. The quality of the reporting was perceived as high, with the most important factors being reliability, credibility, fairness, and comprehensibility, as well as objectivity (Geese et al., 2005). In general, only about 20% of the audience thought that the coverage in 2005 concentrated too much on the competition between the two main candidates, and only a small minority complained that the focus on the candidates instead of the party programs was too strong (Geese et al., 2005, p. 621). The majority of the electorate perceived the overall election coverage on ARD, ZDF, RTL and SAT1 as balanced and consequently also used one of these TV channels for information on the election outcome on Election Day (Geese et al., 2005).

Despite the obviously important role of television for voter information during election campaigns, the question about its influence on voting intention, turnout and decision and, in the larger scheme, democracy, remains: Studies find that voters who are not affiliated with any party and who frequently watch television news tend to base their voting intention on candidate preference instead of issue competence (Schulz et al., 2005). Data collected after the TV debates though shows that a majority of the audience was not influenced by the program in their opinion about the candidates (Geese et al., 2005). Furthermore, while newspapers have been found to be the least trusted among all media[11] they are still among the most important in influencing undecided voters in their voting decision (Schulz et al., 2005).

## CONTROVERSIES

There have been some controversies which have been brought up frequently in public discussion concerning election coverage in Germany. They are usually centered on two areas: the question of media bias and the right of parties to access programs and receive airtime. Whereas the debate over bias (Donsbach, 1997; Hofmann, 2007; Hohlfeld, 2006; Noelle-Neumann et al., 2005) does not differ from other countries, the question of parties' access to the airwaves deserves more

attention: Should, for example, parties with extremist right-wing views have the same right to airtime as every other, non-extremist party? In 1989 and 1993, the public channel ARD raised initiatives against the statutes that force broadcasters to provide airtime to all relevant parties, which was rejected both times. Similarly, demands for a weighted allocation of airtime to provide smaller fringe parties with as much presentation time on air as the larger mainstream parties, have not been fulfilled. Important in this regard is that the Federal Law of Political Parties states that "[w]here a public authority provides facilities or other public services for use by a party, it must accord equal treatment to all other parties. The scale of such facilities and services may be graduated to conform with the importance of the parties to the minimum extent needed for the achievement of their aims" (Art. 5). This equal treatment is based on their relevance for the public good. And in this, it is argued, the already established parties differ significantly from the smaller ones and therefore merit a different treatment—even if this might mean a preferential treatment in terms of media presence and gaining popularity.

A related controversy concerns the access of parties to editorial programming: the law does not explicitly include editorial content in its wording; however, especially the public broadcasting stations usually remind their editors to pay special attention to balanced reporting. How far a station has the duty to invite representatives from every party to a program instead of presenting only the parties represented in parliament already has been a debated issue. In every case which has been brought before court in this matter, it has been ruled that the stations are free to decide in what way they inform their audience about the elections. If they want to provide information via a debate between members of the current parliament, they are not obligated to invite representatives of all campaigning parties. However, if a program contains a debate between candidates of the campaigning parties, a representative of every campaigning party has to be invited, because in this case "a station is considered to violate the principle of equality and objectivity if only those parties that represent the power structures and the established opposition are invited" (Drück 2004, p. 72). While the discussions surrounding these issues of party access are of a more legal nature, the matter of media bias and media campaigning is frequently the topic of public debates. In 2002, for example, the *Financial Times Germany* published an explicit endorsement of a presidential candidate/party—a practice until then widely frowned upon among Germany's media. Gerhard Schröder, German chancellor from 1998 until 2005, more than once criticized broadcasters and newspapers for providing unbalanced reporting on his government and, later on, his election campaign in 2005.

## CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

To sum up, there are at least four macro-trends that can be observed in German election news coverage: Increased personalization, a dominance of strategy frames, growing negativity, and a tendency towards analysis and interpretation. However, these trends are less strong and more ambiguous compared with election coverage trends in the United States. There is no doubt that political campaigning has become more professional during the last decades, and the role of the media has become more important over time—parties and politicians pay attention to media logic, and the media is wary of the parties' use of spin doctors or pseudo events. Still, interaction between the media and politicians is much more politically and less media oriented in Germany than it is in the United States. And Germany's multi-party system as well as unique media history shape election campaign reporting until today. Journalists` professional standards differ from their American counterparts in that they refer more strongly to social norms like ethical behavior, honesty and exchange relationships with politicians than to professional norms like objectivity or



diversity (Pfetsch, 2001). Journalists seem to be slightly more partisan in their commentaries and news decisions than most of their American and European colleagues (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996), and the political leanings of print outlets are rather distinct. This political bias is said to go back to the roots of German newspapers as party organs, and is more or less expected by the audience: Parties have always had a strong stand in Germany, and although party identification is slowly but steadily declining, one can still observe a parallelism between social (and religious) groups and certain parties. On the other hand, Germany still has a strong public broadcasting system, which is committed by law to civic education and information. And as recent studies have shown, the public television channels are still favored by a majority of voters when it comes to election information. Additionally, there is not much of a difference between the commercial and public channels regarding negative coverage. Rather, the media serve as a neutralizer for increasingly negative press releases from the parties by keeping their own evaluations more balanced despite their partisan leaning (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996).

In other ways, the public service channels have implemented reporting styles that are usually associated more with commercial channels: it has come to a convergence of systems and cultures (Schulz & Zeh, 2006, 2007). One trend in television coverage that causes concern is the tendency towards personalization, strengthened by an increase in strategy frames. Personalization has received a major push with the introduction of U.S.-style televised debates in 2002 which involve the two main candidates only and which seem to have affected media coverage of the campaign also (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007b; Weiss 2005). Strategy frames similarly steer the focus on matters of contest and horse race, in which the two frontrunners have dominance over the candidates of other parties or party programs. And while negativity can be balanced through the professional standards of journalists and partisan bias is deeply rooted in German history and the tradition of a party democracy, personalization is a concept rather alien strange to the German context. A multi-party structure can hardly be boiled down to a duel of two individual contenders, and still the recent developments seem to point in this direction.

But as has been said at the beginning of this chapter, the concern about an "Americanization" of German election communication and coverage is not a new one and has accompanied public and scientific discourse over the last 50 years. Until today the macro-trends, despite following the American role model, are modified and converted to fit into the German political and media context. The same can be expected of new technologies which are advancing fast into the area of campaign communication: Every German party today has a website, as does the first female chancellor Angela Merkel, and in the 2005 election, weblogs made their first appearance in political campaigns (Albrecht & Perschke, 2006). The same developments can be observed in the media landscape, with most national as well as regional and some local newspapers and television and radio channels publishing news on a sometimes hourly basis on their homepages and commenting on candidates and events in their blogs. This makes coverage in general much more rapid and more current, and it will mean heightened effort for candidates and parties in elections to keep up with the new pace of reporting. But it will also mean a new independence from the media: a direct approach to the voters is now possible and can certainly be successful if handled cleverly.

## NOTES

1. In Eastern Germany, the Russian allies set up a Communist regime under the leadership of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland, SED). This regime collapsed in 1989.

2. In Eastern Germany, the Russian allies organized things a little differently: licenses were only given to parties and political organizations so that most press was controlled by the state and the number of newspapers stayed virtually the same throughout the 40 years of Communist rule until German reunification in 1990.
3. All translations are by the authors if not indicated otherwise. More information about the German constitution can be found on the website of the German government, http://www.bundesregierung.de.
4. More information about the German press landscape can be found on the website of the Federal Association of German Newspaper Publishers: http://www.bdzv.de.
5. The press laws of all German federal states can be found at http://www.presserecht.de.
6. Updated information can be found at http://www.ard-werbung.de/mp/publikationen/basisdaten/
7. Updated information can be found at: http://www.ard-werbung.de/mp/publikationen/basisdaten/
8. See also Esser (1999), Schulz & Zeh (2005), Schönbach et al. (1998), Weischenberg et al. (1998).
9. It should be noted that 2002 was actually not the first time voters could watch candidates discuss during campaigns: Since 1972, public television has broadcast "Elefantenrunden" ("mammoth rounds"), relatively open discussion rounds in which most of the candidates or party chairs debate current issues during an election campaign. This approach originated from the adaptation of the U.S. model to the German multi-party context where there are several opposing candidates. But ratings for these "mammoth rounds" declined steadily, and they were cancelled in 1987.
10. Schulz and Zeh (2007) note that although candidates appear in a broadly positive light on German TV, the characteristics that are central to their political roles—leadership qualities, professional competence, as well as credibility and honesty—are mostly negatively rated. These opinions originate mostly from other sources; journalists confine themselves to the judgments of apolitical characteristics or the candidates' position in the race.
11. It has to be said that the Internet was not included in this survey.

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